

# *Sketch*

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## Excursion

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# Excursion

Mary Lou Lifka

## **Abstract**

12:24, 26, 27. She slid open the bottom drawer of her politely-black metal desk and carefully extracted a crumpled, brown sack. She kicked the drawer closed, masking the bag's betraying crinkle with the slam. Now a quick survey of the three long corridors extending from the reception area: clear. She swiveled out of her modestly-gold swivel chair and took 17 rapid steps down one of the corridors, to the room plaqued WOMEN...



## Excursion

by *Mary Lou Lifka*  
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12:24, 26, 27. She slid open the bottom drawer of her politely-black metal desk and carefully extracted a crumpled, brown sack. She kicked the drawer closed, masking the bag's betraying crinkle with the slam. Now a quick survey of the three long corridors extending from the reception area: clear. She swiveled out of her modestly-gold swivel chair and took 17 rapid steps down one of the corridors, to the room plagued WOMEN. Once inside, she clicked the bolt, rubbed a smear of eyeliner from under her left eye, swished an errant lock of hair behind her right ear, and opened the brown sack. She removed a cold meat loaf on rye sandwich and ate it in five bites. She saved the foil-wrapped celery sticks for later.

(Dine out tonight. You deserve it. [This is a paid publicity announcement, sponsored by the American Medical Association.] )

Now she had the entire lunch hour to herself. She would go shopping. What to shop for? She could decide in the elevator going down. After all, she was on the 26th floor. She

left the hygienic surroundings of her private lunchroom and strolled down the corridor to the lifts, making certain to notice when her heels crossed from the step-muffling carpeting to the step-echoing linoleum. Someday, perhaps, she would work for an advertising agency and popularize the slogan "Daisies won't tell, but linoleum keeps no secrets." The phrase needed a little polishing, but the idea was original.

She pressed the DOWN arrow, which flashed on appropriately red. (UP arrows were white.) One could undoubtedly organize an entire religion around such mundane symbols, she reflected. A refined "ping" announced the elevator's arrival.

She entered an elevator already bearing a corpulent man who had taken one last drag from his cigarette before he boarded the conveyance several ethereal floors above, and who released the smoke at an average of two puffs a floor. She watched him until he puffed his last at the 19th floor, then began to decide what she would shop for. The decision was an especially difficult one since she wanted everything and needed nothing. Or maybe she needed everything and wanted nothing. This led her to metaphysical ponderings on the delicate difference between need and want, which lasted until the main floor. She exited the elevator and, in a few steps and one half-revolve of the glass door, the building.

The warm noontime slid over her skin like mineral oil. It felt good after the air-conditioned incubation of the morning. There was a Negro woman in a blue dress with a blue scarf on her head dancing to some private jive music in the middle of the mall. No one seemed to mind. After all, it was a public mall.

She turned to her right and headed for the shopping district. The walk across the mall was pleasant and breezy and wet—the fountains were running; they ran even in the rain. What the taxpayers didn't notice wouldn't hurt them.

A kindly policeman helped her cross the street. "Come on, girlie, can't ya walk? One foot in front of the other. That's it. Step it up. Come on, come on."

She really should decide what to shop for, or her entire lunch hour—now 47 minutes—would be wasted. Halfway

down the next block, the rubber heel came off her left shoe. It decided it liked being imbedded in soft tar more than being trampled into new and exciting territories.

The caramel corn shop was exuding a lovely caloric fragrance. Many of the people coming toward her were devouring drooping ice-cream cones. A meat-loaf sandwich is not a particularly substantial lunch, but if she decided to look at dresses she must be in a thin frame of mind. She hoped she wasn't wobbling because of that missing heel.

Marshall Field's was saluting her with its archaic clock now, beckoning her and her money inside. She still had one more street to cross before she could answer its summons. She waited beneath the DON'T WALK sign next to a man carrying the basic virility symbol (a briefcase). When the light was yellow they started across the street together; so did three green cabs in a path perpendicular to them. The briefcase man stopped, grumbled, and said to her, "You have to watch it, you know; they get four points for every one they hit." She smiled the coy receptionist's smile that was becoming shockingly natural to her and waited for the cabs to pass, and the light to change to a safe green.

She crossed the street and entered her destination. She decided then to shop for shoes, since the lost rubber heel was obviously an omen. She escalated up to floor five.

("Second floor: rubbergirdles diaperpins shotguns men's ties rabbits going up!" Bugs Bunny kicks Yosemite Sam out of the elevator, doors close rapidly, Sam turns purple and starts sputtering, Bugs appears at his left dressed as little old lady and asks sweetly, "Can I interest the young man in some French perfume?")

She had to pass through the millinery section before she came to the footwear, and naturally her attention was trapped by a concoction of plum (the "in" color this season, what all the young girls are wearing) flowers that could have looked perfectly charming on a hirsute elephant. She tried it on. She moved on to the British caps and tried a Vanessa Redgrave flourish with a red leather one—pulling the hat on to cover all her hair then whipping it off so her hair came flying

down. She still looked more like a hirsute elephant than Vanessa Redgrave, so she moved on to the velvet headscarves that tie in back. Shocking pink was definitely her color and tie-in-back scarves definitely not her style.

She checked her watch; the long hand was gaining on the short one. She left hats and hastened through handbags to shoes. There she was greeted by a pair of lace-up boots that also zipped if one were too spastic to un- and re-lace them after wearing. How handy. How expensive.

She advanced from impractical boots to impractical shoes. Shoes with sturdy tops and 1/18th inch soles. She found on the display cart two pairs of shoes that would serve well, like English butlers, and four that wouldn't last long but would be extremely attractive while they did, like French maids. Of course, all the display shoes were size 3, and when magnified into her size 8½B would not be nearly so appealing. They would all look like English butlers—clubfooted English butlers, for that matter.

She decided upon a new strategy. She had a handbag of a rather strange brown hue that she had purchased last year to match a pair of Italian flats that dissolved in a cloudburst one soggy October day. She owned only one other pair of shoes which matched that purse, a pair of Red Cross orthopedic shoes with a matronly-high heel that she bought merely because they did match the bag. Since the purse was still in the peak of its leathery health, she would look for shoes to match it. Since she didn't have the handbag with her she would look for shoes of a rather strange brown hue.

Her quick quest through the shoe section rewarded her with one pair of two-strap sandals and one pair of four-inch heeled evening shoes with orange pompoms on the toes. Maybe she didn't have the right shade of strange brown on her brain. She flicked over her wrist to check the time, nearly jabbing with her elbow a girl in a zebra-striped vinyl raincoat and giant sunglasses. She murmured "excuse me" to her watch, which was rapidly ticking its way to 1:21. She headed for the escalators.

She had to escalate down behind two young lovers with matching madras shirts, matching burgundy bellbottoms, matching dimestore Maltese crosses, matching bleached-

blond hair and haircuts, and matching acne.

(Lyrics for a hit song:       They're in love  
                                       Can't ya tell?  
                                       In the groove  
                                       Ain't it swell?

Note: This verse and the following chorus can be interpreted two ways, depending whether the interpreter is a Clean or a Dirty.

CHORUS:   Young love is true  
                   As the sky is blue  
                   And they've got it—DRUMS—wow!  
                   They're swinging—DRUMS—now!

                  They're in love  
                   It's the scene;  
                   Don't ya see  
                   What I mean?

Repeat chorus and first verse.)

She fled from Field's and dashed down past the store that had been having its FINAL DAY SALE for 17 years, past the auction house that wouldn't let anyone under 21 in, past the 22¢ hamburger place, past the 26¢ hamburger place, and into her office building—all in a record 5 minutes 16 seconds.

She walked three aisles to the set of elevators that would stop on her floor, nodded to the elevator man, and entered a waiting lift. She wished she had her umbrella so she could stab the 26 button with its tip. She used her finger instead. Up, up, up, a trapped soul ascending to its judgment. Frightened? Happy? Free or bound? The elevator's doors slid open on the 26th floor before she could decide.

She exited her temporary prison and marched manfully across the linoleum, over the carpeting, through the glass doors barring alien noise from her reception area. She swung into her swivel chair and made a momentous decision: the next time she went shopping during her lunch hour, she would go to the discount drugstore and buy some Right Guard.